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SERMON XXXVI.

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CHRISTIAN DECISION.

Daniel, iii. 18.—*But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.*

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, was a proud idolater. Not satisfied with his existing gods, he conceived the design of rearing a magnificent image of gold on an open plain. Having finished it according to his design, he resolved to dedicate it with great parade. He despatched messengers to summon together all the chief men of his extended empire. Being assembled, they were required, on penalty of being cast into a burning furnace, to fall down and worship the towering image. Among the multitude assembled were three devout Jews, who occupied stations of high honour and authority in the kingdom. At the given signal, all but these three bowed themselves before the idol god. *They* could conscientiously worship only the Most High. The king, being informed of their disobedience, was filled with wrath, and summoned them to his presence. *Is it true*, said he, *O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, do not ye serve my gods, nor worship the golden image which I have set up?* With this rebuke, he gave them another opportunity of complying with the impious edict, and thus avoiding the dread punishment he had threatened. They at once gave him to understand, however, that they could neither comply with his demand, nor were anxious about the consequences of refusal. They assured him, that the God whom they served was *able* to deliver them even from the burning fiery furnace: but whether he would thus deliver them or not, they could not serve his gods, nor worship the golden image he had set up. Upon which, the enraged king ordered them to be bound, and to be cast into the furnace, raised to a sevenfold intensity of heat.

But God, whom they thus publicly honoured, interposed. The flaming element was not suffered to hurt them. Their chains fell off: and they walked amidst the furnace in perfect composure and security. Here was unyielding regard for the authority of Jehovah; and here was demonstration of the everlasting truth, that *they who trust in the Lord shall be as Mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but abideth for ever.*

We are led by the passage to contemplate the NATURE and the IMPORTANCE of CHRISTIAN DECISION.

I. ITS NATURE.

Christian decision, in general terms, is an inflexible regard for the will and honour of God. It is a firm adherence to that course of conduct, which God has manifestly shown to be the path of duty. It is opposed to a wavering, timid spirit, and a partial discharge of religious obligations. In illustrating its nature, a few of its characteristics may be distinctly considered.

1. It is always exercised *with special regard to the will of the Most High.*

In this respect, it is distinguished from a *native* decision of character. The latter is an inflexible adherence to the course marked out by one's own mind. That course may be in accordance with the will of God, or it may be in direct opposition to it. The determination of the individual is formed; and it is not easily shaken, whether it be morally right or morally wrong. But the man of *Christian* decision resolves, and acts accordingly, in view of the manifest pleasure of God. His explicit precept, or plain providence, gives shape to every determination. That precept or providence is looked upon as the foundation of duty: and hence the course determined upon is right in itself, and worthy to be pursued, *through evil report and through good report.* And thus, true Christian firmness, and indeed *heroism*, may exist even in connexion with a native timidity of character.

Of this nature was the decision of the three Jews in Babylon. They refused to obey the impious mandate of Nebuchadnezzar, not from obstinacy, but because *the law of the Lord was graven upon their hearts.* That law clearly marked out their course of duty in the given case; and they could not do otherwise than pursue it. Whether they possessed native fortitude or native timidity of spirit does not appear; but they had that regard for the character, and government, and worship of the Most High, which inspired them with unconquerable resolution.

2. Christian decision is exercised *in regard to matters of real importance.*

Among mere worldly men, a certain robustness of spirit is often exhibited as decisively in matters of indifference, as in matters of moment. Of two ways, each may be pursued without crime, and without damage to any one: but there is a partiality for *one* course, and that course must be pursued at all hazards. Nothing of importance is depending upon the man's decision; and yet he is immoveably fixed. His firmness under such circumstances is a native *obstinacy* of character; not that exalted temper of mind, which asks for the path of duty, and fearlessly pursues it.

In matters of trivial concern, true evangelical decision may be easy and yielding. It exhibits a due respect for the feelings, wishes, and prepossessions of others. It was a bright characteristic of the apostle Paul; who was yet ready *to become all things to all men, that he might by all means save some.* At the same time, in matters of real moment, evangelical decision displays itself with unshrinking promptitude and perseverance. And such was the case, in which those three men upon the plain of Dura were called to act. An attack was made upon the very foundation of all true religion. The most daring indignity was cast upon Jehovah; and to join the general homage before the idol god, would be to sanction the gross impiety of the king, as well as to disgrace their own religion, and blast for ever their character. It was a case, therefore, imperiously demanding the decision they exhibited. Every thing precious in religious principle, as well as every thing tremendous in religious sanctions, required them to act as they did.

3. True Christian decision is exercised *with but little anxiety about consequences.*

The three Jews before the haughty monarch of Babylon, in adopting the resolution they did, were governed by other considerations than such as too commonly exert a controlling influence. They occupied stations of rank and power. A solicitude about consequences would have whispered, 'these must be sacrificed, unless the impious edict is complied with.' The furnace with its blazing horrors was before them; and the burning wrath of the king they knew to be relentless. So that the prospect immediately before them was, of course, inexpressibly appalling. They knew, indeed, that the God of heaven could sustain and defend them; but he had given them no explicit pledge of protection. Still, in obeying the clear injunctions of conscience and of God, they were willing to risk consequences.

The moment the Christian begins to inquire how a given course of duty will probably affect his reputation, his means of advancement, or his safety; that moment he adopts a principle of action which is wide

from a character of evangelical decision. True Christian decision keeps its eye upon the eternal law of God. It asks, not what will satisfy the claims of earth, but what will meet the claims of Heaven; not what will probably secure a quiet passage through this world of gayety, pride, and corruption; but what will exalt the honour of the Most High, and secure his benediction; not what may seem for the present *safe*, but what is *right*.

4. True Christian decision is *uniform and unqualified*.

It was but a single violation of the principles of their religion which the king demanded of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. To fall down and worship the golden image would be but the act of a moment. It would exceedingly gratify one, whom doubtless it was their pleasure to honour. It might save them from temporal disgrace and ruin. It would continue them in a station of rank, influence, and extended usefulness. True, it would be but a single and a momentary act. But by that single, momentary act, what would they have done? Why, they would have renounced their allegiance to the Most High, cast public insult upon his throne, given countenance to the whole system of guilty idolatry, and prostrated their own character for religious decision. If they could shrink from the claims of their religion in one case, why not in a thousand? And what is the difference of *principle* between a deviation from manifest duty in a case of apparently trivial importance, and one of obvious magnitude? The Judge of all the earth has decided, *He that is unjust in the least, is unjust also in much.*

The man of real evangelical firmness admits not the *thought* of a compromise with sin or with error. If a corrupt appetite asks for a slight indulgence, he promptly chastises it. If he is urged to a course of conduct sanctioned by extended custom, but [illegible]ful, he has principle enough to stand back. If he is threatened with disgrace, with poverty, or with violence, to induce him to violate his conscience and the claims of his God, and the demand be ever so trivial in itself, but yet actually sinful, he is still immoveable as *the everlasting hills*. He would sooner break asunder every cord of earthly friendship,—sooner encounter the frown of an infuriated *world*, than offend his Judge in heaven.

Christian decision, then, is an inflexible regard for the will and honour of God. It is always exercised *with special reference to the divine authority*; and thus differs from that mere native firmness or obstinacy of character, which some possess. It is exercised in regard to matters of *real importance*, in distinction from matters of *indifference*. It is exercised *with but little anxiety about consequences*. It is *uniform* and *unqualified* in its operations.

Such is the *nature* of Christian decision. We are next to consider,

II. Its importance.

1. It is important as a matter of *religious consistency*.

The Christian has publicly professed a supreme friendship for Jesus Christ, and a supreme reverence for the unchanging truths and precepts of the Gospel. In thus openly espousing the Christian cause, it is to be presumed that he has counted the cost, and is prepared for self-denial, and even for severe affliction: and, consequently, if he shrink from duty when inclination is thwarted, when appetite or passion pleads, when custom tempts, or even when violence alarms; he turns aside from the course he has solemnly adopted, and contradicts the plain declaration of his own lips. Christian brother, you have sworn allegiance to Jesus of Nazareth: and *what have you to do any more with idols?* What have you to do but to obey your King? regarding every voice that would turn you aside from his will, or detract from his glory, as unworthy of a thought; or rather as a lure to blackest treason! These were the feelings of the three pious Jews before Nebuchadnezzar's image. They had chosen the eternal law as their rule of life, and the eternal God as their Sovereign; and there was a noble consistency between their avowed principles and their conduct. But suppose they had yielded to the royal mandate, and the voice of general custom,—suppose they had shrunk from the appalling furnace,—what could have saved their holy profession from insupportable ignominy, or themselves from the odium of instability, and the inexpressible torture of a violated conscience?

2. Christian decision is important as *a satisfactory evidence of real Christian character*.

In a rigid adherence to the Gospel, consists all the religious decision which is urged in this discourse. And in such a course consists obviously that *evangelical obedience*, which marks the children of God and heirs of glory. This principle carries the individual along in the uniform discharge of duty. And the growing brightness of his character leaves no room to doubt, that he is in union with God, and shall stand on Mount Zion above. The law of the Lord is his statute-book. The honour of God is the object of his steady efforts. And the opening records of the judgment, will display to assembled worlds, the soundness and loftiness of his religious character, and the appropriateness of his final and glorious award. This evidence of religious character was exhibited by the three intrepid Jews in Babylon. Their undeviating adherence to the worship of Jehovah, under such trying circumstances, evinced indeed a piety of no ordinary ardour and brilliancy.

A true Christian, in this imperfect state, may sometimes shrink from an exact discharge of duty. The dereliction, however, cannot be frequent. Much less can it be habitual. Is the Christian professor accustomed to yield to the claims of a corrupt appetite or passion? It is madness and mockery, that he should pretend to the spirit of adoption. Does he hear, without painful emotion, the Saviour's name abused? Jesus of Nazareth is not his Master; nor can he be his Saviour. Is he accustomed to shape his deportment according to the maxims and practices of a perverse world? His allegiance to God's throne is but a *nominal* allegiance. The mandate from that throne is, *Come out from among them, and be ye separate, and touch not the unclean thing.* Is he deterred from his duty by a dread of human displeasure, by a regard to his standing in society, or by any other selfish consideration? It is too manifest that the fear and love of God have never become fixed principles in his degenerate heart. This trial of character is a fair one. And his disposition to shrink from a fearless discharge of duty—to attend to the momentous concern of religion as a matterof convenience or expediency—brands him as a hypocrite. It demonstrates the entire absence of that commanding principle which has sustained patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs, and millions in glory of whom the world was not worthy. O, ye Christian worldlings! your *unchristian life* testifies against you. A direct voice from Heaven could not proclaim more decisively the hollowness of your religion, the delusion of your hope, and the tempest of wrath that must shortly overwhelm you. Ye are fig-trees in the vineyard, bearing only leaves: and such are destined, all of them, to be withered by the Saviour's curse. He has no neutrals in his kingdom. *He that is not with me, is against me; and he that gathereth not with me, scattereth abroad.*

3. Christian decision is important even *as a matter of safety.*

The path of duty is commonly deserted from considerations of temporary interest. Some secular object is either to be gained, or is in danger of being sacrificed.

Perhaps by such policy a temporary advantage may be gained. A pressing evil may for once be avoided; or a desirable object secured. Yet of even this there is no certainty. Indeed, there is danger, even in this life, in pursuing any other than the course marked out by infinite authority. And there is the utmost safety to every important temporal interest, *in committing thy way unto the Lord.*

The policy of the three Jews in Babylon was of a grander kind. It assumed, as an established point, that the will of the Supreme was to be always regarded, whatever might be the will of others. And acting upon this principle, they had their reward even in this life. *God* him-

self *was their refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.* He suffered not an hair of their head to perish, nor a single honour to fade from their brow as rulers of the king's provinces.

But man is not simply a creature of time. And his policy will always be narrow, unless it embrace considerations drawn from eternity. Let all his plans, then, be formed and prosecuted in prospect of an approaching day of reckoning with his Maker, when *judgment will be laid to the line, and righteousness to the plummet.* Then shall the individual, who has been faithful in a few things, be made ruler over many things. While he who has studiously consulted his convenience and temporal interest—who has been controlled at one time by the law of God, and at another by the will of man—will learn, too late, that he has acted upon a policy not to be admitted in transactions with the Eternal. He has attempted a hard task indeed; that of uniting the service of God and mammon. And the result of his toil can be only *shame and everlasting contempt.*

4. Christian decision is important *as a means of securing the respect and confidence of mankind.*

The Christian, to be respected, must manifestly be governed in all circumstances, by the religion he professes—by the religion of the New Testament. His habitual deportment must illustrate the commanding power of God's word. And who does not reverence the man, that can check his strong inclinations when they run counter to the will of Heaven? that can submit to public odium rather than yield to practices at variance with gospel claims? that can promptly sacrifice his ease, honours, possessions, and even *life*, sooner than step an *inch* on forbidden ground, and thus dishonour his Heavenly King? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, exchanged a dominion in Babylon next to that of the king himself for bonds and flames, because they could not violate their conscience and offend their God. And in doing it, they exhibited a loftiness of character which even bad men, as well as good men, must admire to the end of time. They came forth from the furnace unhurt, to bring on themselves the augmented respect of their cotemporaries, even of the infuriate king himself; while those who sought their ruin, by accusing them to the king, were overwhelmed with confusion and disgrace.

Due decision is likewise needful to secure *confidence*. The obligations of the Christian are imperious and peculiarly solemn. And if, with all their dread solemnity, they have not power to bind him to the service of his God—if he can be governed still by considerations of convenience, reputation, interest, fear,—it is manifest to all, that he is unworthy of confidence; and he must utterly fail to gain it. His

very *profession* will be in the way of his gaining it. But let him be found in all cases true to his God in heaven, and no man on earth, can withhold from him esteem and confidence. Who in Babylon was more worthy to be trusted, or actually commanded a more unhesitating and extensive confidence, than those whose integrity had been tried so severely, and proved by the king? Are conscience and the word of God invariably your rule of life; and are you properly using the powers which God has given;—the world will not be blind to such moral excellence, nor backward to commit important interests to your management. Which leads me to observe,

5. Christian decision is important *as a qualification for eminent usefulness.*

It secures the confidence, not only of men, but of the high and holy God; and he will deign to intrust you with power, and peculiarly smile on your endeavours to do good. *Them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed*, is the language alike of his word and of his providence. He does not select, for the execution of his grandest plans, the timid, the hesitating, and the wavering. Oh no! His servants must be able to say, *God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, of love, and of a sound mind.* The whole history of his church strikingly confirms this truth. When one was wanted to be the deliverer of his people from Egyptian bondage; to receive and publish from his mouth the eternal law of Sinai; and to write the only authentic history of the creation and first ages of the world; whom did God select? It was MOSES:—a man, meek indeed, but of unbending religious principle;—a man, who could show his allegiance to God, by declining a proffered heirship to the proudest, richest, mightiest throne of earth;—who could cheerfully forsake Egypt, *not fearing the wrath of the king.*

And when God would spread the gospel of his Son far and wide among the Gentiles; whom did he adopt as the *chosen vessel?* It was PAUL:—a man, who, from the moment that light broke in upon his soul, had no other question to ask, than, *Lord what wilt thou have me to do?* Being satisfied of God's will, *he conferred not with flesh and blood.* He relinquished at once his bright prospects of earthly distinction. He proclaimed forthwith to a prejudiced world, and before kings and judges, *Christ and him crucified*—fearless of consequences.

And when again the night of ages had settled down upon the world; when the church had become nearly extinct amid the darkness of Papal delusion; whom did God select as his chief instrument for bringing about the Reformation? It was MARTIN LUTHER:—a man humble before God, yet bold before men;—a man, who, when summoned by imperial

mandate, to meet his enemies at the diet of Worms, did not hesitate; and who, when met on his way, and urged to turn aside by a throng of anxious friends, could say in view of danger, "*That when called by so high authority as that of the Emperor, he must conclude it to be the Divine will that he should go; and that though he should be obliged to encounter at Worms as many devils as there were tiles upon the houses of that city, this would not deter him from his fixed purpose.*" He went: he opened his mouth boldly, and triumphantly: and the whole world was made to bend at his will.

And when, in our own land, the churches were in danger of awful debasement, from the admission of the ungodly, and from the prevalence of doctrinal errors; whom did God select to withstand and turn back the desolating flood? It was the immortal EDWARDS:—a man religiously inflexible, alike *amid evil report, and good report.* The Almighty loved him, and honoured him as the angel of His strength. The Spirit from heaven again and again sanctioned his ministrations with power and great glory. And some of the efforts of his pen, made under peculiarly trying circumstances, have contributed more perhaps, than all other human writings, to preserve and perpetuate the purity of our churches. Venerable man! his sun went down in full-orbed splendour, only to rise in brighter heavens, and his name will live among the choicest records of truth and piety, till time shall be no longer.

I might here also speak of WHITEFIELD, and WESLEY, and their associates, whom God seemed to have set apart for the special purpose of reviving the spirit of vital godliness in a degenerate age. These men, amid ridicule and obloquy, first within College walls, and afterwards in crowded temples, in market-places, and under the open canopy of heaven, fearlessly worshipped God *in spirit and in truth*, and proclaimed to sober hypocrites as well as profligate sinners, that *without true holiness there was no escape from the damnation of hell.* God signally honoured their faithfulness while they lived; and their influence is still felt, and it will continue to be felt, in the conversion and joy of multitudes which no man can number.

It would not be difficult to name some, of our own day—kindred spirits of those illustrious dead—of whom even infidels and idolaters have been constrained to say, *These men are the servants of the most high God, who show unto us the way of salvation.* But I need not, surely, multiply instances to prove, that God will bless, and render eminently useful, such as are distinguished for Christian decision. His promise is plain and everlasting; *Them that honour me I will honour.*

Indeed there is something in the very nature of this principle of ac-

tion, which gives a happy direction to all the faculties of the soul; which keeps them in steady unison with those of the Eternal Mind. So that where God moves, there the decided Christian is found. And in union of effort with such a Being, how can he be otherwise than eminently useful, as well as safe and happy?

And now, in view of such commanding motives, who would not cultivate a spirit of Evangelical Decision? It must be cultivated, and it *will* be cultivated, not by a solitary few here and there, but by thousands—nay, by thousands of thousands—ere the Gospel shall have power over the nations. And O, what scenes of grandeur will appear, when the millions who profess the pure religion shall exhibit the spirit now contemplated? Then the Church will be indeed *the light of the world: the glory of the Lord will be seen upon her; and the Gentiles will come to her light, and kings to the brightness of her rising.*

And why should this blessed consummation be delayed? If one obscure monk could come forth with the sword of truth, and, in defiance of Papal and Imperial domination, could move the moral world; what might not be speedily accomplished, would one half the professing Christians, now enlightened and free, rise up in the spirit of Luther, and, with corresponding effort, say to the whole world, *Your light is come, and Satan must reign no longer?*

Brethren, let me, in conclusion, affectionately yet earnestly inquire, Is this spirit of Christian decision actually cherished and exhibited by yourselves? Is there nothing in your deportment like a compromise with sin and error? Are the claims of your Master and Judge all met with cheerfulness, and discharged with promptness? O does conscience never thunder nor whisper a rebuke! Is there no blending of the service of God and the service of the world? Are you daily pursuing that course of comparative disregard to the petty affairs of time, or the opinions of men—that course of uniform self-denial and burning zeal in the service of God—that course of invincible adherence to the will and honour of Jehovah, on a review of which the Judge enthroned can say, *Well done, good and faithful servant?* O, JUDGE YOURSELVES NOW THAT YE MAY NOT BE CONDEMNED WITH THE WORLD.

END OF VOL. II.